

Central Intelligence Agency



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CIANESA

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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**Redirecting Iranian Foreign Policy:
Rafsanjani's Progress**

Summary

Since assuming office last August, Iranian President Rafsanjani gradually has subordinated militant Islamic ideology to practical considerations in his conduct of foreign policy. As a consequence, Iranian foreign policy has become less confrontational and more flexible, allowing Rafsanjani to expand Iranian relations with many of its neighbors, including the Soviet Union,

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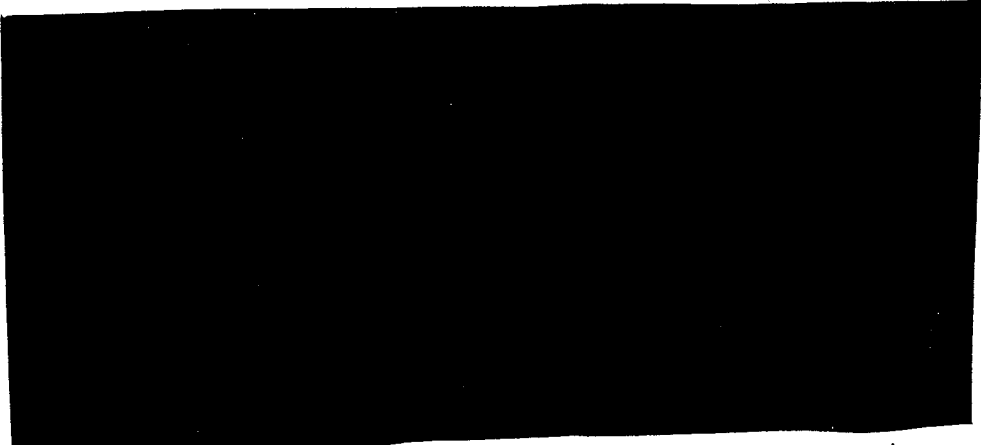
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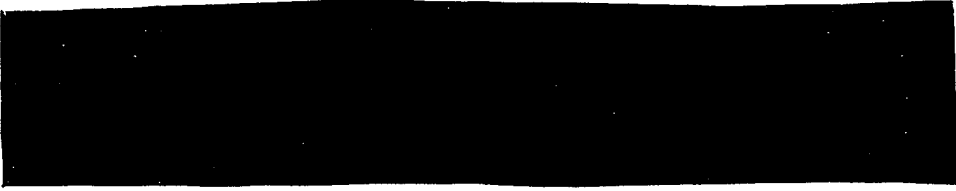
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Exemptions: NR

Reorienting Policy

Rafsanjani's emphasis on Iranian national interests has not been demonstrated in a single, dramatic change in foreign policy, but in a series of incremental shifts. Taken together, these shifts in policy have helped set the stage for a serious effort by Rafsanjani to expand relations with his regional adversaries and the West:



- o After playing a key role in improving relations with the Soviet Union in 1989, Rafsanjani worked hard to preserve bilateral ties despite vocal domestic criticism of Soviet suppression of Muslims in Soviet Azerbaijan and Central Asia in January and February 1990. Official Iranian statements at the time only "regretted" Soviet actions and urged a peaceful resolution of the problem. Since then, Tehran has begun shipping natural gas to the Soviet Union and,  has negotiated an agreement with Moscow to obtain MiG-29 aircraft and possibly T-72 tanks.
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[REDACTED]

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The Iranian-Soviet Thaw

The improvement of relations with the Soviet Union is one of the most significant recent changes in Iranian policy. Prior to 1989 Tehran regarded Moscow with a fear and loathing drawn from memories of two centuries of Russian and Soviet intervention in Iran, ideological rejection of Communism, and alarm at the occupation of Afghanistan. In January 1989, however, Khomeini sent an envoy with a personal message to Mikhail Gorbachev--Khomeini's first such communication to a head of state--which marked a turning point in Iranian relations with the Soviet Union and has legitimized Rafsanjani's subsequent efforts to expand the relationship. [REDACTED]

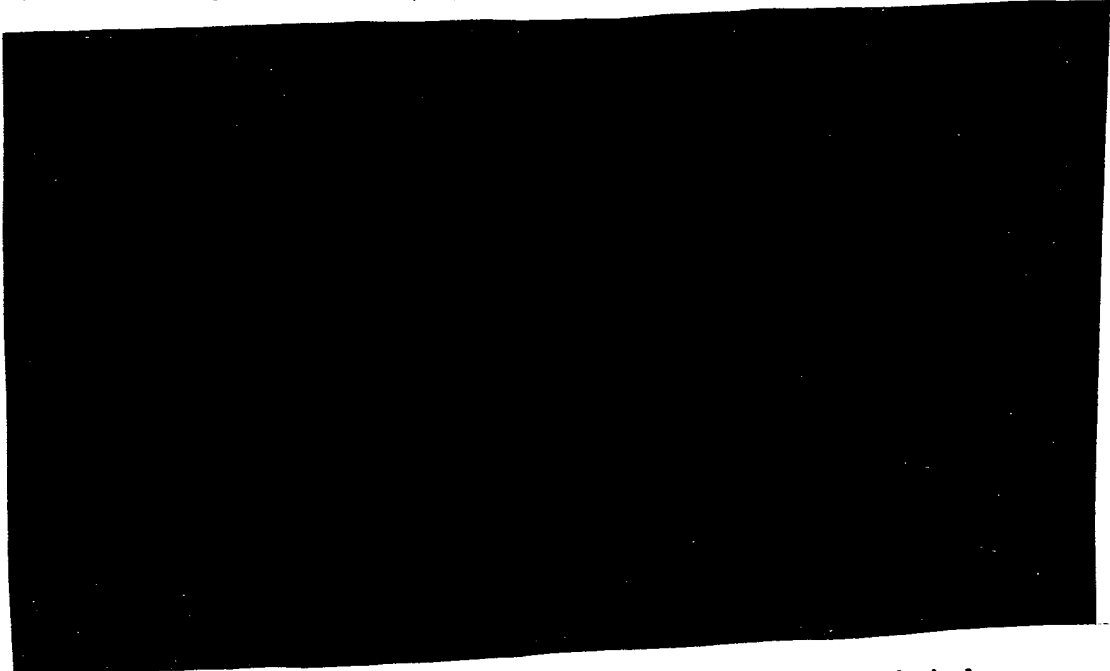
The letter praised Gorbachev for revising Marxism and allowing greater religious freedom, and urged him to study Islam. It was followed by an end to mutual propaganda attacks and a meeting in Tehran between the Soviet foreign minister and Khomeini. Economic delegations also were exchanged between Moscow and Tehran in the following months. The importance Rafsanjani places on better ties to the Soviets was most clearly demonstrated in June 1989, however, when Rafsanjani visited Moscow less than three weeks after Khomeini's death. During this visit Rafsanjani signed agreements on economic and political cooperation, which, although largely symbolic, laid the groundwork for the supply of Soviet weapons to Iran and the resumption of Iranian gas sales to the Soviet Union, which had stopped ten years before. The convergence of Iranian and Soviet interests in minimizing Western influence in Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf, as well as in avoiding interference in each other's internal affairs, argues in favor of continued cooperation for the next several years. [REDACTED]

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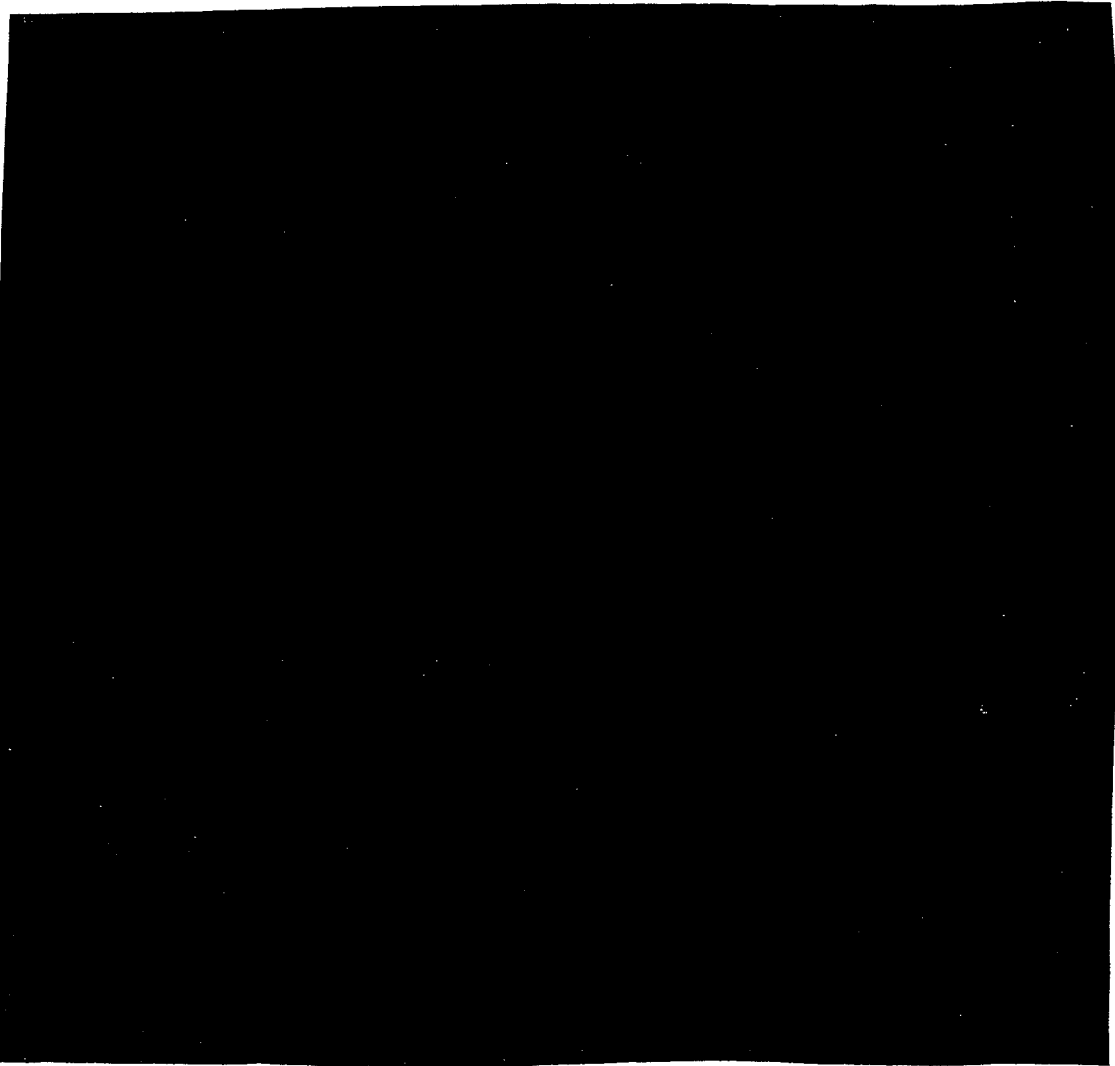
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Constraints on Rafsanjani

We believe that domestic opposition limits, but does not dictate, Rafsanjani's conduct of Iranian foreign policy. Rafsanjani's domestic opponents--most notably Majles Deputy Mohtashemi-Pur, Ayatollah Khomeini's son Ahmad, and, to a lesser extent, Majles Speaker Mehdi Karubi--have vigorously criticized Rafsanjani's new pragmatic priorities. Their attacks, conducted largely in the press and in the Majles, have focused on perceived affronts to Islam in France, Turkey, and the Soviet Union, and on the untrustworthy nature of the West. They have characterized Rafsanjani's initiatives as departing from Khomeini's policies. This criticism has blocked or delayed some of Rafsanjani's initiatives. 



We believe the potential for militant elements to mobilize the clerical establishment against perceived departures from Islamic principles causes Rafsanjani to move cautiously in implementing his policies. Tehran's commitment to militant Islam continues to color even those policies in which Rafsanjani has successfully subordinated religious considerations to the interests of the state.

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- o Rafsanjani tolerated considerable, and at times inflammatory, press and clerical attacks on Soviet actions in Azerbaijan, despite Soviet irritation, and his own efforts to prevent a rift with Moscow. Iran's Islamic Propagation Organization also has announced plans to produce an Azeri translation of the Koran to be shipped to Soviet Azerbaijan, and to provide instruction to Soviet Muslims—actions that are likely to create occasional friction with Moscow.
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Implications for the United States

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In any case, the United States will face a more adept diplomatic opponent in Iran over the next year, whether or not outstanding disputes with Tehran are resolved. Iran's relations with Moscow, for example, already have allowed Tehran to play a larger political role in the settlement of the Afghanistan conflict than its limited military involvement there would seem to warrant. In addition, Tehran's conclusion of an arms agreement with the Soviets will diminish the impact of Washington's weapons embargo;

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